The FARMS Project
Where Science and Community Meet

Colorado Conservation Tillage Association’s (CCTA) Executive Director, Joni Mitchek, laughs when she tries to think back to where the specific idea for FARMS (Farmers Advancing Regenerative Management Systems) originated. She and Lauren Hafford, FARMS Evaluation Coordinator, attempt to trace back through the maze of fateful meetings and passionate conversations. “It was natural, all the pieces fell together after a few brainstorming sessions,” Lauren says finally.

Those pieces, and a Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) from Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that goes until 2023, formed an innovative project known as FARMS, which provides producers with financial, technical, and social support regardless of how far along they are on their soil health journey. All of the participating producers live in the High Plains of CO, NE, and KS. Twenty-four producers are participating, with 10 in Colorado. In turn, vital data regarding implemented soil health practices is shared with the FARMS team, not only to help others in the program, but to benefit the soil health effort nationwide.

“We’re not only evaluating soil health. We’re also looking at nutrient density and the economic impacts of soil health management systems. Additionally, we decided to look at the social impacts as well, like what the barriers are to adopting soil health management and how we can make those challenges easier for producers to overcome,” Mitchek explains.

An Island in the Plains
FARMS producer and long time soil health practitioner, Curtis Sayles, is all too familiar with the social barriers of practicing soil health. Sayles transitioned completely to continuous crop and no-till in 1997, and has been incorporating additional soil health practices into his operation ever since. As the long-term practitioner in his regional hub of soil health enthusiasts, he’s not only lived it himself but has witnessed others dealing with the same challenges. He’s heard reports from younger farmers that their neighbors treat them differently once they learn what they’re doing. “These young guys are the future of this movement, and for them to be isolated makes it much easier for them to fall back on conventional methods, to keep doing it like everybody else.” Along with the costs and risks involved, Sayles credits the social stigma as one of the biggest hurdles to get over when adopting soil health practices. That’s one of the reasons he’s so invested in FARMS, to break down social barriers and give other producers support and community.

To Learn more about the Colorado Department of Agriculture’s Soil Health Efforts visit https://ag.colorado.gov/conservation/soil-health
The Right Fit

The High Plains face a major environmental challenge that much of the existing soil health research doesn’t account for: the lack of precipitation. “It’s a very challenging region to adopt soil health practices, we’re working with a lot of dryland farmers who don’t have irrigation. Much of the information they’re able to find on their own isn’t localized at all, it’s for people farther east or for those that have irrigation. What’s exciting about this project is that it focuses on a region that needs to have its own data set, so that it’s applicable for folks that only have 11 inches of precip a year.” Mitchek says. “And we aren’t just going to have soil health data at the end of this,” she continues. “We’ll be able to show economic possibility. We’ll be able to share a whole systems approach.”

The Colorado Department of Agriculture wanted to help address this data gap, too. Cindy Lair, Program Manager for the Colorado State Conservation Board, helps CCTA by keeping them up-to-date with CDA’s soil health efforts as well as bridging the partnership with the NRCS.

The Proof is in the Soil

Even though the program just got underway in May of 2020, FARMS already boasts some impressive measurables. Currently, 3,053 acres are enrolled in the program, with a range of acreages per producer between 13 acres to 9,000 acres. The total numbers of acres operated by participating producers comes in at 60,902. This leaves ample room for a substantial impact.

“I’m hoping that we’ve connected producers into a network that will support them for the rest of their soil health journey, and hopefully encourage them to turn around and reach out to new people who are just getting started,” Mitchek says.

If we can make regenerative agriculture work in Eastern Colorado, it will work anywhere in the world.”- Curtis Sayles, FARMS Producer and Mentor

Even though Sayles has been practicing soil health for 22 years, he’s already met people he never knew before that have been pursuing soil health, too. “I have a longer record of hard knocks, but those guys are doing everything I do, and maybe more.” The roots of the network are already taking hold. The next couple years of the project are sure to reveal even more valuable data and connections.

To find out more about the FARMS Project, please visit: https://farmsproject.org/